

# mercercorridorproject

## Scoping Summary Report

Prepared for:

The Seattle Department of Transportation

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July 7, 2004

## Introduction

The Mercer Corridor Project, led by the Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT), is being conducted to determine transportation improvements on Mercer Street from I-5 to Aurora Avenue North and the Seattle Center. SDOT held an agency scoping meeting and a public open house/scoping meeting to provide information about the project and to receive comments on the alternatives under consideration. As part of its public involvement program, and in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA), SDOT informed agencies and the public of the opportunity to submit scoping comments on the alternatives, in order to focus the scope of the environmental review.

## The Project and Public Scoping

SDOT, as the project proponent and lead agency, and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) as co-lead agency, have determined that environmental documentation NEPA and SEPA is required to provide information on alternatives and associated impacts for the Mercer Corridor Project. A NEPA Environmental Assessment (EA) will be prepared for adoption as a SEPA Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). Scoping was conducted in compliance with NEPA and SEPA.

The proposed project would result in vehicular and pedestrian improvements, improved signalization and safety improvements in the Mercer Street corridor (including Mercer Street and Valley Street) between the I-5 on/off ramps at Fairview Avenue North and Dexter Avenue North (or 5th Avenue North in the case of Valley Street/Roy Street). The project's purpose is to better accommodate vehicular, transit, pedestrian and bicycle traffic, support development of the South Lake Union Urban Village, and improve access to a greatly enhanced South Lake Union Park.

Two alternatives were presented for comment. One alternative includes a two-way widened Mercer Street between Dexter Avenue North and Fairview Avenue North with changes on Valley Street to provide local access to area businesses and South Lake Union Park. A second alternative involves improvements to Valley Street, a through westbound connection from Valley Street to Roy Street, and a new westbound Roy Street underpass or overpass at Aurora Avenue North connecting to the Seattle Center and Lower Queen Anne.

In accordance with NEPA and SEPA, the scoping process and public involvement plan were designed to receive comments on the range of proposed alternatives and the impacts to be evaluated in the EA. SDOT initiated the scoping process, inviting the participation of King County, Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT), Sound Transit, regional, state and federal agencies and affected tribes, as well as the public including businesses, affected groups and organizations, and individuals.

The public involvement program conducted for scoping included public notices, a project brochure (with a postage-paid mail back comment form), agency scoping letters, an agency scoping meeting and a public scoping meeting/open house, and invitations to comment directly to SDOT via email or other correspondence.

Participants in the public involvement process were asked to give their comments on two alternatives, suggest additional alternatives, and identify issues they believe should be evaluated in the environmental review process. Comments received during the scoping process will be used to refine the alternatives, identify potential new alternatives for consideration, and help define the scope of the environmental analysis.

The Draft EA is scheduled to be released in Spring 2005. Final selection of the preferred alternative will be made in Fall 2005 after the Final EA is completed. Construction on the selected alternative is scheduled to commence in Summer 2007.

## **Notification Process**

Notification of scoping began on March 4, 2004 when a Determination of Significance and Request for Scoping Comments was published in the SEPA register. Scoping notices were published in the *Queen Anne News* and the *Magnolia News* on March 3, and in the *Daily Journal of Commerce* on March 4. On March 4, a scoping letter was mailed to 140 state, county, and city elected officials, tribes, and agencies. A project brochure with information about the project and the scoping meeting/open house notice was mailed to approximately 4,600 addresses within the study area. The scoping meeting/open house was also advertised on SDOT's website.

## **Scoping Meeting/Open House**

The agency scoping meeting and public scoping meeting/open house were held on March 18, 2004, at:

The South Lake Union Armory  
860 Terry Avenue  
Seattle, Washington

The agency meeting was held from 3- 4 p.m. and the public open house was held from 4:30 – 7:30 p.m. Approximately 12 agency representatives attended the agency scoping meeting, while about 100 members of the public attended the open house. The open house consisted of staffed display areas and a comment table. Participants were able to talk one on one with project staff, view displays of the alternatives and other project information, and record their comments on provided comment forms. Participants were informed that they could submit oral and written comments at the meeting or submit written comments via email, mail, or fax by March 25, 2004 (the end of the scoping period).

The public open house also provided the opportunity to learn more about and comment on The South Lake Union Transportation Study. The study, being conducted by SDOT to determine a range of improvements within the entire South Lake Union area, presented its draft recommendations for public review and comment.

## **Agency Comment Summary**

Three agency letters were submitted to SDOT during the scoping period. The following is organized by agency and summarizes the comments made by each responding agency. Copies of the agency letters are provided in Appendix A of this report.

### ***King County Department of Transportation (DOT)***

In general, comments from King County DOT were in favor of the project's potential ability to meet the City's growth management goals and enhance redevelopment in the South Lake Union area. An offer was made to work with the City on this particular transportation improvement project. The following specific comments were made as suggestions to consider when evaluating alternatives:

- A Mercer Corridor crossing for pedestrians and bicyclists is critical to support development of that South Lake Union area as a mixed use community.
- Improved transit access is consistent with project goals and critical to the development goals for the area. Specific transit oriented comments included:
  - Project should incorporate the potential for transit to operate on Mercer, Valley and/or Republican Streets.
  - Support converting parking to a travel lane eastbound on Mercer Street with the option to operate it as a peak-period transit lane if needed at a future date.
  - EA should address north-south transit movement and barriers (Mercer Corridor) on Fairview and Westlake Avenues.
  - Transit support facilities (layovers, stops and pedestrian access) should be addressed in the EA.
- Freight movements, along parts of Valley Street and Westlake Avenue North, are a component of traffic flow in this area, and should be considered in the EA.
- Explore area-wide travel demand management strategies, as well as travel through this corridor specifically related to events.
- Issues related to vehicle contaminants in water runoff and air quality should be considered during review.

### ***Washington State Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation***

This letter was brief and indicated that if Federal funds or permits are required as part of the project, that Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act must be followed. The comment was also made that the Washington State Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation will thoroughly review and comment on the project when the Draft EA is completed.

### ***United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Region 10***

In brief, these comments focused on the need for improved public transportation to the Seattle Center as part of this project. The point was made that currently, the majority of public transit to the Seattle Center comes from the downtown area. Additional public transportation, from the north, south and east, to the Seattle Center is needed, and is a

good fit for this project as the Mercer Corridor is a main access route for the Seattle Center. EPA urged the City to work with other transportation entities to accommodate at least one mode of public transportation in the Mercer Corridor and South Lake Union planning area.

## **General Comment Summary**

During the public open house on March 18, 2004, 35 written comment forms were submitted. In addition, 13 comments were written on the project display boards. Seventeen comments were submitted using the mail back comment form provided in the project newsletter. One letter was received from a member of the public. The deadline for all comments was March 25, 2004.

This summary outlines the common issues and themes identified in the submitted comments, as well as a list of some general ideas or recommendations provided in feedback to the alternatives that were presented at the open house. Copies of the public comments are provided in Appendix B of this report.

### ***Project Purpose, Alternatives and Options***

Seven comments were submitted offering support for the Mercer Corridor Project in general, urging the City to move forward with the improvement plans, to stay on schedule and avoid further delays, and to secure funding.

The majority of comments about alternatives showed support for Alternative B, or the idea of making Mercer Street a two-way street and moving traffic away from Valley Street. Reasons for this varied from making the Valley Street area more bicycle and pedestrian friendly, to accommodating mixed use development that would create a “neighborhood” feel along Valley Street, to a desire for a narrower and tree lined Valley Street that would ensure optimum utilization of South Lake Union Park by increasing safety in the area.

A smaller number of written comments indicated preference for Alternative A, the Fairview/Valley realignment, because it provides the option to cross Aurora Avenue North at Roy Street, allowing better traffic flow between the freeway and the parking areas at the Seattle Center. A comment was placed on a board at the open house noting a concern regarding Alternative B, stating that people would still want to use Valley Street in that option, but that the street wouldn’t have the capacity.

Two commenters were not in favor of either Alternative A or B, stating that neither alternative solves the problem of afternoon eastbound traffic, and that this project would cause major traffic disruptions during construction and come with a large cost, with limited, if any, improvement as traffic increases over time.

One commenter cautioned that the alternatives should consider and comply with area neighborhood plans.

## ***Alternative Recommendations***

Several comments were submitted that pointed out qualities of both alternatives A and B, and made recommendations for combinations of the two, or offered new design options. In addition, comments posted on the display boards at the open house recommended changes to both alternatives. These comments and recommendations included:

- A Broad Street connection would be undesirable for local access to Queen Anne and Magnolia.
- A Valley Street waterfront “boulevard.”
- Separate local and regional traffic.
- A one-way grid system.
- Concern about taking away the route from Broad Street to Fairview Avenue North, via Valley Street, and having to fight cars to get to I-5.
- A sunken Aurora Avenue North option that would reconnect the east-west grid.
- Consider minor re-grading of Aurora Avenue North to reduce the 18% grade on the Thomas Street over-crossing. A reduced grade would allow a trolley connection to Seattle Center. If a less steep Aurora Avenue North/Thomas Street can be achieved, dropping the Roy Street/Aurora Avenue North under-crossing would become the preferred option.
- Consider a 2-way design for Mercer Street, between Fifth and First Streets.
- Make Roy Street a two-way street, and make First Street and Queen Anne Avenue two-way between Mercer and Roy Streets.
- Create an Option C to combine the best aspects of alternatives A and B. Use Alternative B, east of Ninth Avenue North and portions of Alternative A, west of Ninth Avenue North. The two lanes of west-bound Mercer Street would be directed to a 2-lane westbound Roy Street underpass of Aurora Avenue North. That is preferred over Alternative A as it would not adversely impact the park-like setting of Valley Street, east of Ninth Avenue North. It would be better than Alternative B in that Seattle Center traffic and south slope Queen Anne traffic would not have to weave to get to westbound Roy Street, but can get there directly.
- Incorporate the Roy Street underpass to “Alternative B.” Most Queen Anne traffic would opt for Roy Street if the alternative existed.
- In Alternative B, Valley Street may require more than one lane in each direction.
- Extend one lane from “Mercer to Broad Ramp” over the Roy Street intersection and then to the underpass.

## ***Public Transit***

Several comments received applied to public transportation services, including connections to bus services, the monorail, and accommodating the proposed streetcar line. There was substantial support for accommodating the streetcar to create improved public access between South Lake Union, Fred Hutchinson Research Center, and downtown. Suggestions regarding the trolley included extending the trolley along Westlake Avenue towards Fremont, as well as to UW, and to have a streetcar stop at South Lake Union Park.

One commenter suggested keeping Westlake Avenue as a one-way street, but dedicating one lane as a transit-only lane to accommodate public transit to the area. Comments also

indicated the need to increase transit access to support area growth. Specific suggestions included converting parking to a travel lane for transit eastbound on Mercer and to explore area-wide travel demand strategies, especially related to events, which cause frequent and significant congestion in the corridor. There was also an interest in increasing options for people to get to the South Lake Union area by water, using water taxis, ferries, or hand powered boats. There should be a facility for these transportation modes to dock and lock up, such as kayak racks, while people shop and have dinner in South Lake Union.

On a more regional scale, the suggestion was made to convert the I-5 reversible express lanes to HOV lanes, and to restrict all I-5 ramps to HOV only to reduce traffic congestion on Mercer Street, Valley Street, Stewart Street, Howell Street, Olive Way and Fairview Avenue North. This should be done in cooperation with Sound Transit and King County Metro to find long term transit solutions and management for the area. Including a future connection to, and station for, the Monorail to connect South Lake Union with Seattle Center was also recommended.

### ***Bicycle and Pedestrian***

Bicycle and pedestrian facilities, safety, and mobility in the area were of high priority among the comments received, and many commenters noted that planning for non-motorized traffic in the area will be critical to the success of the project and utilization of South Lake Union Park. The project should accomplish connectivity to the Burke Gilman Trail via the Westlake Trail, and between South Lake Union Park and the Seattle Center. The project should address capacity for increased future bicycle, pedestrian, and scooter traffic in the area as density increases, and what that would mean in terms of safety. Another safety concern is the connectivity and safety for pedestrians walking from the Cascade neighborhood to the park, as well as improved pedestrian access between Queen Anne and South Lake Union. One commenter urged SDOT to avoid sending pedestrians through a “deep” underpass to cross Aurora Avenue North. Another recommendation was to create a bicycle “park and ride” at South Lake Union to ease bicycle traffic downtown and allow bikers to board buses. One commenter mentioned that pedestrian safety should be improved regardless of this project, beginning with improving and increasing the existing Mercer Corridor sidewalks.

### ***Seattle Center Event Traffic***

Seattle Center events and the lack of public transportation to Seattle Center were frequently mentioned as a cause of congestion. In both alternatives there was concern about how to handle backups after Seattle Center events. Careful review of this problem, including how many blocks of backup traffic will be generated after events under each alternative, should be completed.

### ***Street Connectivity***

In both Alternatives A and B, significant concern was expressed about street connectivity and adequately addressing both the east-west and north-south connections. Several commenters favored restoring the city grid as well as preserving “back-road” alternatives to Mercer Street for local traffic. There was support for creating a more direct connection for regional traffic to the Seattle Center off of I-5, and for having a two-way Mercer

Street, but not at the expense of losing overall connectivity. One comment recommended pursuing an “award-winning” Mercer Boulevard concept.

Suggestions for improving connectivity included: trenching Terry Avenue North to allow for a bridge over the traffic lanes and the trolley; maintaining the connection between Broad Street and Fairview Avenue North via Valley Street, for people who travel in the corridor but want to avoid Mercer Street; having two options for getting to lower Queen Anne (via Broad and Roy Streets) to help dissipate traffic; reducing the number of stoplights; and widening Aurora Avenue North.

Another idea included keeping Valley Street as is, but improving existing conditions. Also, the connection from Broad Street to northbound Aurora Avenue North should be adequately addressed in Alternative B, as using Westlake Avenue North and Valley/Roy Streets was not an acceptable option.

### ***Traffic Forecasting***

Several commenters wanted to see traffic volume evaluations for the proposed alternatives. These related to future traffic volumes, particularly with the planned urban density for the neighborhoods of South Lake Union, Ballard, and Queen Anne, as well as travel time predictions between Queen Anne and Capitol Hill, and between Eastlake and downtown.

A review of traffic numbers was requested to determine whether a two-lane connection to Ninth Avenue North and Mercer Street is really needed. One commenter requested that the two-way Mercer option along Seattle Center be reviewed to determine how it would affect flow through Fifth Avenue and Mercer Streets, and how the newly added left-turn needs are addressed.

### ***South Lake Union Park***

People were generally very supportive of moving interstate traffic away from Valley Street and South Lake Union Park and saw it as crucial to the successful redevelopment of South Lake Union Park.

### ***Public Participation in Project Design***

Several comments indicated a desire to keep the public informed throughout the process and to ensure that there is no misrepresentation of public interests.

### ***Economic Development and Impacts***

There was concern about the conceptual plans causing dislocations of businesses located west of Aurora Avenue North, along Roy Street. In addition, in the redevelopment plans for Alternative B, comments suggested that careful attention be paid to accommodate access for the developers during construction, particularly at the properties bordered by Mercer Street, Fairview Avenue North, and Republican Street.

One suggestion was to include plans for a future expansion of the Port of Seattle in South Lake Union.